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Evaluation of the Life Skills Project Summary Report



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Y Loteri Genedlaethol
Awarding funds from
The National Lottery®



A report for The Big Lottery Fund
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The Life Skills Project

Introduction

Life Skills is a £14million project joint funded by the European Commission's Convergence programme and the European Commission's Regional Competitiveness and Employment programme and matched by the Big Lottery Fund. The project provided resources for the delivery of services throughout Wales that supported targeted groups of economically inactive or unemployed people to engage or re-engage with education, learning, volunteering and employment. It focused on the following participant groups:

- Care leavers;
- Carers and former carers;
- Economically inactive families; and
- Older people (50+).

Delivery Model

Service providers (mainly of third sector origin) were procured to deliver 22 service contracts for Life Skills, with the contracts specific to each target group and targeted against a series of outputs and results/outcomes. The focus on achievement of targets for each contract left flexibility for service providers to develop tailored models of service delivery to suit their client group for each contract.

Achievements

Life Skills has enabled the sustained delivery of support to a range of target groups that had typically been underrepresented as beneficiaries of mainstream employability provision. The rationale for supporting these groups was reinforced during the development of the project when the country fell into deep recession. Despite having to be delivered in the midst of a very challenging economic period, the support provided met the aims of the project by increasing participant confidence and enabling many underrepresented groups to access education, undertake volunteering or gain employment.

Life Skills has also been delivered in the midst of welfare reform with the introduction of the Work Programme in particular affecting the procurement and subsequent delivery of Life Skills (with those mandated on to the Work Programme unable to benefit from Life Skills support).

In terms of Life Skills' achievements, by way of summary:

- As of March 2015, a total of 5,287 participants have been supported by the project with 941 of those supported having entered employment. This is more than double the combined (RCE and Convergence) target for the project.
- Almost 2,200 participants have gained qualifications through the project whilst 328 participants have entered further learning following their receipt of support.

The project has therefore been highly successful and this paper focuses on the lessons learnt from the project.

Key Findings and Lessons Learnt from the Project

Contracts – Versus Competitive Grants

Life Skills represented the first time that the Big Lottery Fund in Wales had procured service provision through contracts with service providers rather than managing service provision through a series of competitive grants.

The contracting approach represented a steep learning curve for the Big Lottery Fund with the management and monitoring of the contracts demanding far greater administrative resources than anticipated. These demands were enhanced by the range of targets assigned to the contracts, which in turn created significant inflexibilities from a delivery and contract management perspective. However, the approach enabled the offset of risk to service providers and offers a greater level of scrutiny of service provider performance.

In turn, for service providers, and particularly those from the third sector, it has provided an opportunity to tender for services, and in doing so, to encourage organisations to critically appraise their ability to deliver outputs and results/outcomes associated with service provision. However, some output and result targets were particularly challenging to deliver including those stipulated by the Big Lottery Fund. In some instances these targets were wholly reliant on perceived client needs and did not reflect the effectiveness of the service offered.

The Big Lottery Fund operated with a complement of contract managers who worked closely with each service provider. The duality of their role (on the one hand providing support to the service providers whilst on the other, scrutinising service provider delivery) placed challenges on the contract managers. However, a high level of praise from service providers suggests they met this challenge effectively.

Payment by Results and Management Fees

Service providers were paid on the basis of the delivery of certain outputs and results specified within their contracts with the estimated unit cost informing the level of payment they secured.

The first six (of eight procurement rounds of service providers) procurement rounds were purely focussed on these payments with no associated management fee that could act as a resource for the ongoing delivery of a project. Following feedback about the challenges of project management that a lack of fee created, a management fee was introduced for the final two procurement rounds. Service providers of these rounds very much welcomed the change as it gave them sufficient resources to plan and develop the provision by lessening the initial pressure following contract award for securing payments for outputs and results.

Whilst service providers were initially cautious and somewhat negative about the payment by results model, as the project has progressed the providers have become increasingly positive about the model which has led to a more target orientated culture in some organisations.

Partnership Working

Partnership working has been a critical element to the successful delivery of contracts – particularly in relation to participant engagement, with local authorities (for the Care Leaver target group and Jobcentre Plus (for the economically inactive and the older people target groups) considered to be particularly important partners. The contracts have enabled service providers to strengthen their presence and integration with other organisations and led to an enhancement of referrals into their service provision. Conversely service providers have struggled where they have sought to deliver services in locations where they have had no previous experience or have no established presence. It is important that this is factored in when appraising proposals for service delivery of this nature.

Collaboration and Networking amongst Service Providers

Two knowledge sharing events were held with Service Providers delivering Life Skills provision with the first taking place in March 2012. It was widely felt that these should have commenced earlier in the programme as they may have helped with collaboration, particularly at project set up stage when service delivery models were still being finalised and service providers were still finding their way through the scheme.

The Challenges of Rurality

The majority of service providers referred to the challenge of delivering services in rural areas with service provision being more resource intensive in these locations. Delivery staff referred to frustrations regarding journey times and their ability when offering outreach provision to only visit one client in a day.


Others referred to the comparative lack of available job opportunities in rural areas acting as an additional barrier to securing an employment outcome for Life Skills participants. Evidence from the participant survey gave further weighting to this perception with rural participants less likely to perceive an improvement in their job prospects as a result of the support they had received.

To overcome the additional barriers to service delivery and outcome achievement in rural areas recognition (through funding awards) should be given to service delivery and to results achieved in locations considered the most rural.

The benefits of sustained support and multi-year contracts

Participants from these target groups require sustained support to secure outcomes. Over half of the participants from three of the four target groups were supported for at least 12 months with the most benefit appearing to be gained through participation for at least 6-18 months. This highlights a need and value for a consistent, long term approach to supporting beneficiaries. However, the length of support required by some participants proved challenging for service providers given the contractual (and payment) structure that they were delivering to.

Service provider contracts were awarded for at least three years. Contracts of this length and of this nature were typically seen as a rarity for these organisations and were widely welcomed. However, some felt that the length of these contracts could have been extended further, which given the longevity of support required for many of the participants would appear an appropriate suggestion.



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